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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN HOA BINH
AND SON LA PROVINCES: STARK CONTRASTS IN THE NORTHWEST, PART
II

REF: HANOI 697

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On a March 13-15 visit, the Ambassador discussed religious freedom issues with the leaders of Hoa Binh and Son La Provinces (reftel). The difference between the Hoa Binh approach to religious freedom and Son La's attitudes was stark. Hoa Binh is a model for the kind of leadership we would like to see across Vietnam: policy savvy, professional and moderate. Son La represents a more traditional approach to religious freedom, down to denials of the existence of religion, and has been unable to come to terms with even its Catholic residents. End Summary.

HOA BINH PARISH CHURCH

¶2. (SBU) On March 13, the Ambassador visited Father Joseph Nguyen Trung Thoai, parish priest of Hoa Binh town. (Note: a number of local officials including the provincial Religious Affairs director were in attendance at the church, but they politely granted the Ambassador's request for a private discussion with Father Thoai. End Note.) He explained that in addition to his responsibility to the 4,000 Catholics in his portion of Hung Hoa Diocese, Bishop Vu Huy Chuong recently assigned him to minister to the "several thousand" Catholics in Son La Province as well. Father Thoai presented a letter to the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) of Son La informing them of his assignment on March 8, but the local leadership has not allowed him to take up his duties in the province. Thoai said that nearly all of his parishioners in Hoa Binh are ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese). At least 1,000 majority ethnic Kinh Catholics live in Son La province as well, but there is also an unknown number of other ethnic minority followers in that province. Father Thoai has only been assigned to minister to Kinh believers.

¶3. (SBU) Thoai said that the region as a whole has had a difficult history since the 1954 exodus of Catholics following the French retreat after the battle of Dien Bien Phu. In both provinces, almost all church property was destroyed or appropriated in the 1950's and '60's. When the Catholic Church returned to Hoa Binh in 2002, the parish acquired new land to build a church. This building has housed the parish since 2004 although it is now too small to serve all parishioners. Father Thoai has asked the province for permission to lease a small amount of land on a hill near the current property to build another church. Catholics in Son La reportedly worship in three house chapels. Thoai noted that given the amount of land he has

to cover to minister to his cross-border parish, it would be better if the Bishop were allowed to assign more priests to the job. Things are getting better, however. For example, twenty-seven young men from the region are currently studying in seminary and once ordained should be assigned to the diocese. The parish has grown with the return of pre-1954 Catholics and the addition of new converts through marriage and through births. Father Thoai performed 100 baptisms of adults in 2005 and performs six infant baptisms each month.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador offered to raise the property issue with the Hoa Binh PPC and the issue of accreditation to Son La with the Son La PPC. Father Thoai assented, and noted that Hoa Binh authorities have been very accommodating since the Church returned to the province. He also said when asked that he is not aware of any Protestants in Hoa Binh. (Note: The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) (ECVN) confirms that there are no Protestant groups active in the province. End Note.) Father Thoai did not know how many Protestants there are in Son La, but the ECVN estimates 1,900.

HOA BINH PPC

¶5. (SBU) Following the church visit, the Ambassador met with Hoa Binh PPC Chairman Bui Van Tinh. Following a discussion of economic issues (reftel), Tinh noted without prompting that all religious activities in Hoa Binh have been facilitated according to official policy. For example, the current parish church was built on land given by a Catholic family, and the PPC will give permission to the parish to buy an additional piece of land that they have identified very soon. Tinh also noted that Hoa Binh Catholics have contributed positively to "the unity of society and grassroots democracy." The Ambassador applauded the

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province's efforts to facilitate religious freedom, particularly the decision to allow the parish to expand. He cautioned, however, that in the future it is likely that Protestant followers will appear in the province because of its proximity to other Protestant areas. It is important that Hoa Binh's leadership understand their obligations under the Prime Minister's Directive on Protestantism and the spirit of the legal framework on religion when they deal with these groups. The Ambassador noted that not all local officials have been as accommodating to Protestants as the Hoa Binh PPC has been to Catholics. Tinh affirmed that the PPC is committed to the religious framework, especially since "religion never goes against the will of the people."

SON LA PPC

¶6. (SBU) As noted reftel, Son La PPC Chairman Hoang Chi Thuc's approach to issues, including religious freedom, was a stark contrast with the Hoa Binh Chairman's attitudes. During his stilted welcome presentation he made no reference to religious freedom issues accept to say that the people of Son La have experienced spiritual and material improvements because of their education and training. As reported reftel, the Ambassador noted at the end of this first session with the Chairman that one of his five main focuses as Ambassador is on human rights and religious freedom. As leader of a province with a large number of ethnic minority Protestants, you have a larger responsibility in this area than other PPC chairmen, he told Thuc.

Dinner with Son La Chairman

¶7. (SBU) At dinner the following night, the Ambassador noted that the GVN's new religious framework has improved religious freedom in most of the country, but there are

several instances where Son La Province could be doing better. The Catholic Church was allowed to establish a new diocese in 2002 that includes parts of both Hoa Binh and Son La provinces. There are at least 3,000 Catholics in Son La alone, but no priest is allowed to minister to their needs. Bishop Chuong has written to the PPC asking for permission for Father Thoai in Hoa Binh to travel to the province for this purpose. The diocese will also want to build a church in Son La eventually. The Ambassador urged Chairman Thuc to approve these requests.

¶8. (SBU) The Ambassador also noted that there are at least 2,000 Protestants within the H'Mong ethnic minority community affiliated with the ECVN. At least six groups have applied to register their activities with local authorities, but so far they have been unsuccessful. The PM issued his instruction on Protestantism in early 2005, but clearly, more work needs to be done in the Northwest to register these groups. Local officials who do not understand or do not like religion block believers' efforts to register. In the past year, the Ambassador acknowledged, the situation for Protestants has improved in Vietnam, especially in the Central Highlands, but attention is now turning to the Northwest. "I hope your director for religious affairs will take the lead in helping these people register their faiths," he said. The Ambassador also noted that the question of removing Vietnam's designation as a country of particular concern for religious freedom (CPC) is likely come up in the run-up to President Bush's visit in November. Every possible step in facilitating Catholics' and Protestants' faiths in Son La improves the chances that CPC designation will be lifted.

¶9. (SBU) Thuc said that the PPC pays close attention to GVN policies on religion including the PM's Instruction on Protestantism. (Note: It was clear at this point that the Chairman did not know the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism and seemed to think that the PM's instruction applied to the Parish's request and not the Protestants. End Note). The twelve different ethnic groups in Son La live together in solidarity, he asserted. "There is no religion here through we respect the right of people to maintain their traditional identities. We do not have any Protestants and no religious groupings. Protestantism was introduced by lowlanders so we have no chapels or churches. Nevertheless, we respect peoples' rights to establish social organizations with their own administrative rules." Suggestions for such groups must come from a grassroots level, he added.

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¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador challenged these assertions, noting that there are believers in Son La who want to be able to worship. They are being blocked and this is wrong and against Vietnam's constitution, he said. We understand that some officials block nontraditional religious practices out of a misguided sense of protecting ethnic minorities, the Ambassador continued, "but this is still wrong. There is room for tradition and religion in Vietnam." The Ambassador also noted that more than a year before, Thuc's counterparts in Lao Cai and Lai Chau also said that they had no believers under their responsibility, but they now admit that they do and the PPC chairmen in those provinces support these believers' efforts to register their activities. In Son La, there are at least 3,000 Catholics and 2,000 Protestants. "These are not large numbers but they still shouldn't be blocked from practicing their faith". The Ambassador promised to provide the People's Committee with details on these people, including which areas of the province they live in.

¶11. (SBU) Thuc said that it is the PPC's approach not to interfere in an individual's right to practice his own beliefs. The provincial leaders have instructed local authorities to build a "cultural house" in order to "build a

civilized life and to maintain cultural identities." Communities might even build churches if local officials approve, he said. The Ambassador acknowledged that religious freedom is sometimes not an easy issue, but reminded Thuc that Vietnam's national law is just that, the law of all Vietnam.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The difference between the Hoa Binh approach to religious freedom and Son La's attitudes was stark. Hoa Binh PPC Chairman Tinh is a model for the kind of leaders we would like to see across Vietnam: policy savvy, professional and moderate. We hope that Chairman Thuc's approach to this important social issue is becoming obsolete, though we have heard denials of the existence of religion from provincial leaders in the recent past. While it is true that Hoa Binh has not faced the generally more difficult problem of assimilating Protestants into their society and is thus an unfair comparison with Son La, Son La's inability to come to terms with even its Catholic residents is troubling. Consistently, provinces such as Son La with high concentrations of ethnic minorities have proven the most recalcitrant on religious issues, particularly Protestant issues. Lai Chau and Lao Cai demonstrate that attitudes can change, though, and Son La will be our next project for a turnaround. End Comment.

MARINE